

Advent 2016



I have a niece who had her first child when she was very young. Despite her tender age, she was a fantastic mother. Her son was in high school when she met a man and fell in love. He loved her and proposed, but he was also honest enough to share with her that he really wanted a child of his own. She wanted to marry him, but she was most ambivalent about having children fifteen years apart. Going through it all again was not something she had envisioned. She worried that her older child would feel displaced.

She did, however, love the man who had proposed and asked her to have a child with him. She wanted to marry and spend her life with him. So she took what was for her a giant leap of faith, married, and soon became pregnant. When her second son was born, it was love at first sight—for everyone!

Imagine what a leap of faith was required for Mary to agree to carry and bear God's son, through the Holy Spirit. She received no promises that Joseph was going to stick around. In Tom Key's play, *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, the birth story is set in Georgia, and Mary and Joe are high school sweethearts. When Joe hears through the high school grapevine that Mary is pregnant, his main concern is to get his football jacket back!

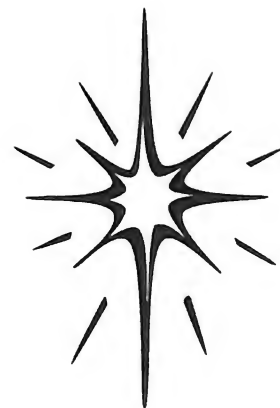
It has always intrigued me that God came to us as a baby. Babies are fragile. Babies and children are molded by the adults in their lives. There is so much

room for human error. Even when parents do everything they know to do to the best of their capabilities, the outcome is not assured. It was risky of God to trust us with his son. God had to know we as human beings were not up to the job.

Every year we are invited again to nurture the themes of Advent in our minds, hearts, and actions. The way of the Christ Child is the way of hope, peace, joy, and love. This year, maybe more than others, we need a healthy dose of hope from God, hope that does not depend on the outcome of an election or the ending of conflict. My prayer is that the Advent season can go a long way in bringing a measure of peace, joy, and love to our nation and its people. My prayer is also that this Advent booklet might be one of the ways that God brings Advent to your heart and your home.

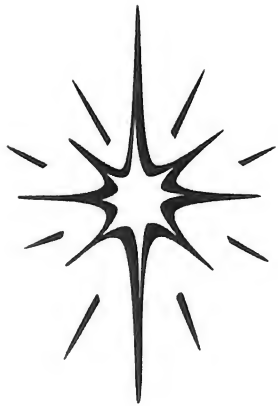
As always, we are grateful for all that make this initiative possible. The University administration and staff provide invaluable support and blessing to the Advent project. In addition, Mrs. Lisa Hollifield, Dr. Jim McConnell, and Dr. Danny West offer editorial and production assistance to Heather Bridges Moore and Laura Smith in making this guide a reality. Without this team effort, none of this would be possible.

And, so the journey begins....



ADVENT AT GARDNER-WEBB 2016

Sheri Adams
Professor of Theology and
Church History



SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 27

Robert W. Canoy
Dean, School of Divinity
and Professor of Theology

Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

It certainly wasn't what I wanted—to be “left behind!” No one wants to be left out. Not to be chosen, to be rejected, to be overlooked, or to be abandoned (for whatever reason) is the worst feeling ever.

It certainly wasn't what I intended—to “leave someone behind!” But it happens.

And sometimes when it happens, it's clearly someone else's fault. People do dumb things, make promises that they cannot keep, put themselves in situations that they cannot sustain, say wrong things at the wrong time that cannot be unsaid. The end result is always the same—someone gets “left behind,” or someone “leaves someone behind.” It's hard to say which is worse—being the one “left behind” or being the one that has to live knowing that you left someone behind. Most of us know both feelings, and those feelings are not pretty.

Jesus knew a lot about rejection and abandonment. He knew about them from the past story of the Bible, and he knew about them from personal experience. In fact, in Matthew 24:36-44 he recalls a scene from the days of Noah. After Noah built the ark, and the flood came, he witnessed many people “left behind.” Jesus actually describes pairs of workers—men and women—one taken, one “left behind!” Noah, as the story goes, picked pairs of male and female animals (Genesis 6:19) and loaded them into the ark. He was careful not to leave a single one behind. Could there be anything more dreadful than one half of the pair being “left behind”?

Jesus uses the Noah story to illustrate the future coming of the Son of Man and the gathering of the chosen ones. They will come, he said, “from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24:31), because he doesn't want anyone “left behind.” He wants all to be ready for the “day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42). So he came, lived, taught, died, and was raised from the dead so that all can be ready.

That's precisely what's at the heart of Advent; Jesus came so that no one ever has to be “left behind!” He came to make things right and to get us ready. He became one with us in every way so that he could redeem all of us, the good and the worst of us. He suffered rejection. He took all of its hurt and all of its pain so that no one ever has to suffer alone. He took our sorrow and our abandonment. He took our suffering and the consequences of it. He took it all right into himself, becoming both the victim and the perpetrator. He became truly one with the very worst of us (and the worst in us!). And he did all of this so that at his coming we will be ready to receive him. That's what Advent is all about—God becoming truly one of us in his own Son.

There has never been, and there never will be, another ADVENT to match the first one. But we can “live into” HIS ADVENT this year by knowing that we will not be “left behind”! NEVER!

And, so, Advent begins—again!

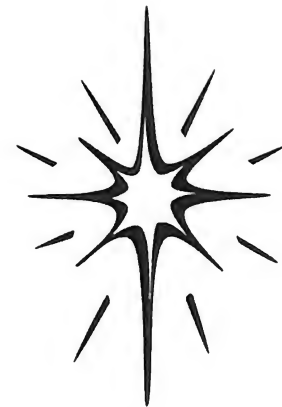
Reflecting on Psalm 124 and Romans 6:1-11, I wonder what our lives would be like without the help of the Lord, what our fate would be without the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Psalm 124 paints a picture of what could have become of Israel had it not been for the help of the Lord. The Israelites would have been swallowed up by enemies, prey for the predator, and washed away in flood waters. In other words, Israel would have become extinct. Israel endured hardships, but they survived. God protected the Israelites and provided for them. He has done the same for us.

God sent His son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. He protected us from a death sentence by providing a means of atonement, a savior. Paul explains in Romans 6:1-11 that we are baptized into Christ Jesus, into His death, and also raised with Christ from the dead. Our old selves are gone away so that we may walk a different life, a life that is no longer enslaved to sin.

I will leave the exegesis of the Romans passage to my School of Divinity colleagues, but I will share my experiences with baptisms. Yes, I did write baptisms, plural. I have been baptized three times. The first time I was baptized came after my cousin and I were overcome with the fear of God during Vacation Bible School when I was eleven years old. I attended a Methodist Church, so we were sprinkled right there on-the-spot by the pastor when we decided we needed a "ticket to heaven." Our parents were not happy that we were baptized in their absence, so we were re-sprinkled (my second baptism) the following Sunday.

My third and final baptism was conducted when I changed membership from the Methodist Church to the Baptist Church, where a full immersion was required. At seventeen years old, close to graduation from high school, I understood my need for a savior. My decision to join the Baptist Church came during the time our church had invited a Focus Group from Gardner-Webb University to work with our youth group. Little did I know I would be a faculty member here fifteen years later. God used that small group of students to reach into my heart and they introduced me to the Jesus Christ I had learned about for years.

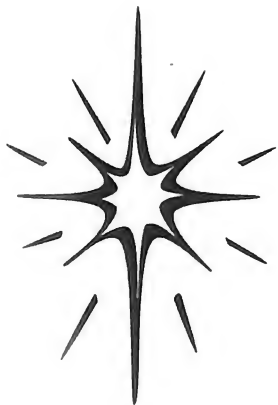
Being baptized three times adds a little comedy to my life, but understanding what baptism symbolizes has changed my life. My prayer for those reading this today is that you will reflect on your baptism into Christ. We died with Him so that we could be raised with Him. I am thankful that God sent Jesus, and I am overjoyed that we will soon be celebrating His coming to Earth.



MONDAY,
NOVEMBER 28

Jason Willis
Associate Professor of
Mathematics

Psalm 124
Romans 6:1-11



TUESDAY,
NOVEMBER 29

Tabatha Coker
Admissions Counselor
for APMP Program and
School of Divinity
Graduate

Genesis 9:1-17
Hebrews 11:32-40

As a child I remember having conversations with others that would end in the phrases “pinky promise,” “cross my heart,” “scouts honor,” and many more. These phrases also came with symbols of interlocking pinkies, making an X over my heart with my index finger, or making the Scouts Honor sign with my right hand. No matter the phrase or corresponding symbol, they all meant the same thing: I trusted those people to follow through with what they were telling me.

Throughout the Bible we find God creating His own version of the pinky promise, and today’s text is one of those places. God creates a covenant with Noah and every living creature, for all generations to come. In this covenant He promises that “never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11). He did not just create the covenant; he created a symbol for all generations to come to remember it—a rainbow. It is that symbol that is sealing the deal to a promise.

It seems silly to think that a symbol can have so much power, but it does. It seals the promise in a tangible way that words lack. It is a symbol that jolts our memories when we forget the words that were spoken. The rainbow, the pinky promise, we can see and feel when we aren’t sure if the words are real.

For a variety of reasons we have trouble believing that people are going to do what they promised us. This lack of trust often carries over into our faith.

Trusting in God and His promise is not easy because we cannot sit across the table from Him and get a verbal response of reassurance when we have questions or concerns. This is where faith comes in to play.

We have to have faith in Christ, faith that what He promised will be fulfilled. Throughout the text we find example after example of people who were faithful to their calling. Their faith surpassed the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse that they received while living life in covenant with Christ. At the same time, they were not sure if what they were doing was enough because they were not receiving the response they expected. In the end, “(they) were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God has planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrew 11:39-40).

Remaining faithful is not easy. There are challenges around every bend, but it is what we are called to do. God has made a covenant with us and one day we will experience it in full; for now, however, we are called to live out our faith and hold tight to both the words and symbols that God has set before us to remind us of the covenant He has made.

Music has always been an important part of my Christmas memories and celebrations. I learned the carols at a young age, sang in every children's cantata growing up at First Baptist East Flat Rock, NC, and later enjoyed the new arrangements we sang in my high school's chorus class. Each year, singing these favorite carols with fellow church members and friends reminds me of the divine story that is our restoration and reconciliation to God the Father.

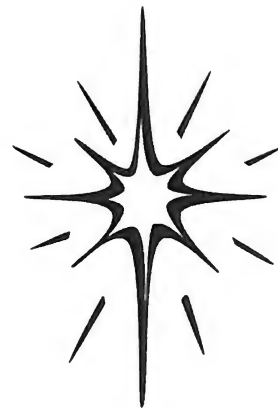
At the beginning of Isaiah 54, we read the figurative language, "Sing, O barren." This barrenness refers to the years of Jerusalem lying in ruins some sixty years before. A message that can certainly lead Zion to sing is one in which the Lord now promises in verses 2-3 that she will now have to spread out on all sides to accommodate the growth and increase.

Zion has just gone through a time during which she has felt as though God has briefly abandoned her. In verses 6-10 we learn that God is initiating a path of reconciliation, showing compassion and everlasting love. In verse 10 the author writes, "For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall my covenant of peace be removed."

In Isaiah 54, Israel is beginning a new life and a new covenant in which God is taking the lead. This was worthy of song then, and remains so today. God has taken the initiative in making things right with himself. Join me and others this Christmas season in singing the carols of restoration and reconciliation.

The words of John S. Dwight in "O Holy Night" describe that moment when the barrenness of Zion (and indeed, the whole world) ended with the birth of a savior. This song of hope is one of my favorites.

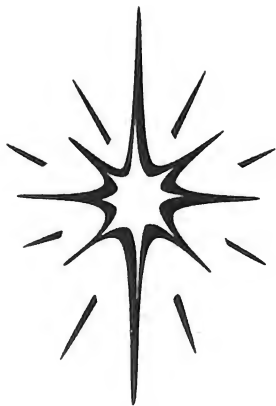
O Holy night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
'Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
Fall on your knees
O hear the angel voices
O night divine!
O night when Christ was born
O night divine!
O night, O night divine!



WEDNESDAY,
NOVEMBER 30

Keith McKinney
Pastor, Boiling Springs
Baptist Church
School of Divinity
Graduate

Isaiah 54:1-10
Matthew 24:23-35



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 1

Anita Sanders
Assistant Professor
of Education

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

Advent is more than a time of the year for me. It is the opening to our inner hearts. Advent generates a spirit of love and happiness from within the heart, and within the biblical text, a portion of Acts 1, the disciples in their search for a new disciple sought the Lord. They said, "O Lord, you know every heart"; yes, the Lord knows what is in our hearts.

The psalmist, David, says in Psalm 139, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." David asked the Lord to search his heart and thoughts. A beautiful and meaningful way to honor our Lord and Savior during the season of Advent is to invite Him into our heart and thoughts. I ask you, as I ask myself every Advent season, "What is in your heart?"

There is a real catchy commercial jingle speaking of credit cards that asks, "What's in your wallet?" And the thought is, "are you carrying the right card, the best card, the card that will give you the best and greatest value in all of your life experiences?" I won't ask what is in your wallet. However, if it resembles my wallet, there is probably nothing in it, but I have a warm covenant surrounding me because my heart is filled with the spirit of love and happiness.

During this Advent season, like so many others, I will share what little I have with others. I will send Christmas calendars to the elderly, lonely, and widowed. I will purchase Christmas gifts for eighteen widowers. My husband and I will treat

two elderly friends to a theatrical presentation and dinner. We will make a donation to the Children's Home of Oxford, North Carolina, help sponsor a family with Christmas gifts, make a donation to the Crisis Ministry of Union County, and pray for everyone to experience the true meaning of Advent. From the hearts and souls of all, you will find Advent as a season of joy and delight and a time of peace and goodwill. So no, the jingle you hear in the air this Advent is not the jingle of "Jingle Bells" or over-limit credit cards, but rather the rhythm of a jingle from on high: "O Lord, you know every heart."

He knows our heart. For every year, we give so much away without expectations. The return has yet to disappoint. One year someone asked what I wanted for Christmas. Normally, I avoid the question because my taste can be expensive, but I shared my story about how Santa failed to bring my request of a gumball machine. After the conversation, I continued volunteering, only to wake up Christmas morning to a gumball machine under my tree.

This Advent, what will God find jingling within your heart?

Homecoming, patience, discipline, guidance, blessing, light, healing. These images emerge from a rather gloomy prophecy of Isaiah, in which he expresses God's disapproval that Israel, God's chosen people, has run to Egypt for help, against the LORD's desire, because the people see it as the only real political choice that will ensure their own survival.

Sometimes we all need to hear the Psalmist's advice: "O put not your trust in princes, nor in any child of man; for there is no help in them" (146:2). Then comes Isaiah's hopeful assurance: even though they will suffer the consequences of their own actions, God will discipline them for the better, and they will live secure at home in Zion. They will weep no more, and their cry will be answered. In a situation in which there seems to be no guidance, there will indeed be teachers to guide them; a voice, speaking from behind, will tell them which turns to take. The LORD is faithful and will save Israel, God's own people. We can hear echoes of this hopeful message in the Acts of the Apostles, when Saul, also known as Paul, preaches this good news of salvation, revealed fully in God's incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, to Jews who have gathered on the Sabbath at a synagogue in Antioch. Not only does God save Israel, but shines the light of salvation for all the world, Gentile and Jew alike. Paul's message is specific. God has done something in history: Jesus, through whom the forgiveness of sins is preached, was born in the lineage of David, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was raised from the dead. Out of darkness, light has shone for Jew and Gentile both, even though the darkness was very, very dark.

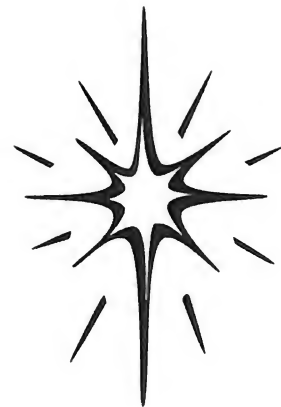
Second Peter 1:19 captures this imagery of darkness and light very well for me: "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts . . ." A scene from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy comes to mind: Frodo's parting gift from Galadriel is a small source of light that comes in handy in a very dark place, "when all other lights go out."

Observing the season of Advent, literally "the Coming," has come to be a very joyful yet very uncomfortable ordeal for me. On the one hand, I am reminded that just as surely as Jesus Christ came the first time, he will come again and make everything right with the world. On the other hand, I am reminded that my own sin is a part of what is wrong with the world.

The Day of the Lord is coming; God help me when it does.

But I do have a light for this dark place. I am waiting for the Dawn.

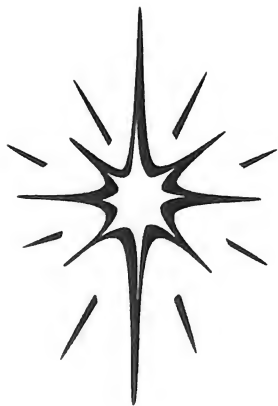
Come, Lord Jesus.



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 2

Matthew Lineberger
Gardner-Webb Graduate
Adjunct Faculty
Department of Music

Isaiah 30:19-26
Acts 13:16-25



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 3**

**Carroll McCray
Head Football Coach**

**Isaiah 40:1-11
John 1:19-28**

As I reflect on this time of year, my mind quickly moves to the real meaning of the season. The excitement and anticipation towards presents and gifts in our society should be transferred to thoughts of the arrival of our Savior.

As a child, my parents worked to give me far more during this season than they received as youngsters. However, the greatest gift they ever gave me was not materialistic. It was their guidance toward the true meaning of Christmas and the salvation afforded to us through Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Old Testament, signs by God, through the prophets, point us to His Son, who will be sent to save the world. Many will be appointed the task to pave the way for Jesus. In the book of Isaiah, it is revealed that John the Baptist will be the one appointed that task. As stated in Isaiah 40:3, "A voice of one calling, in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." In great humility, John the Baptist is described as, "A man sent from God," who "was not the Light," but "came as a witness, to bear witness to the Light, so that through Him everyone might believe."

Just as John the Baptist was charged to prepare the way for the arrival of God's Son, Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, came to be our example of how to live and treat our fellow humans. As a coach, I am reminded of my responsibility to my team (sheep), which is to draw them to the

magnitude of the Savior's arrival and His mission to save us from our sinful nature. What an emotional and wonderful time it is as we anticipate the celebration of the arrival of the Savior of the world!

In John 1:19-28, John the Baptist answers the Pharisees that he is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, stating, "I am the voice of the one calling in the wilderness." John the Baptist also states, "Among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:26-27). The example that John the Baptist provided on how to lead humbly, serve selflessly, and understand his calling is a beautiful picture of obedience. My charge is to point this team (flock of sheep) to the King. Not only to His arrival, but to the second coming of Jesus, and the importance of having a personal relationship with Him.

We all are shepherds of a flock (our team, our students, our families, our friends, and neighbors). The biggest question all of us have to answer is: What is the condition of our flock? Are we preparing a way?

As we prepare for this most joyous of seasons, may the celebration of the arrival of our Savior push us to prepare ourselves and others around us for His second coming.

As recorded in Matthew 3:1-10, the writer strongly emphasizes the need for preparation. A quote from the ancient prophet, Isaiah, was inserted for inspiration and intensity. The news of the coming of the promised Savior must be well presented. The news was exciting. He has come! Now, the "Word" made human dwells among people. The way to salvation is now known to them. However, preparation for His way requires strenuous effort, and sometimes sacrifice.

Preparation is to make oneself ready. More than roads, or houses, or trees, or lights and music are involved. We are to decorate how we live, not merely where we live. Certainly, symbolism is important and lights, ornaments, and greenery are appropriate reminders.

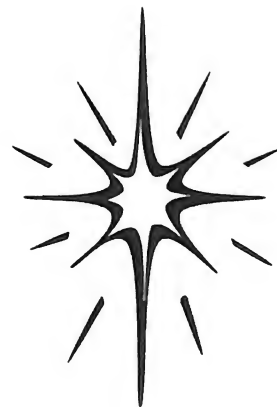
This Christmas, the world needs to see the light of love from our lives, the music of harmony in our fellowship and in our relationships, the spirit of oneness in the grace of our acceptance. Such characteristics in human form can't be flashed from trees or colored by shades and designs. The counsel from scripture is to prepare who we are and what we are, if we are to be God's Word made human this and every Christmas. "The Way" is not a road; it is a pilgrimage, a journey. We are on the way from one place to another—earth to heaven. The Savior is with us to show the way.

Over sixty years ago God called a young Bob Shepherd to tell the "Good News." He was a sales manager for a candy manufacturer. He had a bride, two very young children, and a widowed mother to

support. His answer, like Moses, was, "I can't." But God said, "I have chosen you to spread the good news about 'The Way.'" The excuses became lame. The call was strong, as if ancient voices loudly beckoned.

I was that young man. I sought the counsel of an elderly, respected minister, who for many years had taught "The Way." His counsel was, "If you want to tell how to make crooked paths straight and how to find 'The Way,' you must prepare yourself." I began preparation. I have shared the story many times with many people. In all seasons, I am still preparing and shall continue to prepare.

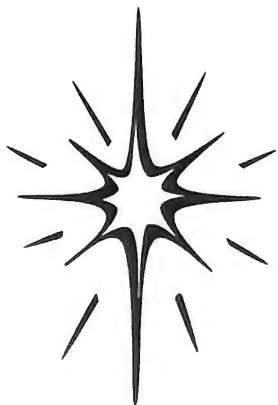
The Christmas story has no ending, nor does the preparation.



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 4

Bob Shepherd
Board of Trustees
Morganton, NC

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Venita Totten
Professor of Chemistry

Psalm 21
1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

NASA astronauts spend most of their careers preparing for space. They spend endless hours studying and practicing skills for missions they may never experience. Teams work tirelessly to anticipate problems and to solve those problems. By the time astronauts blast off on a mission into space, they have studied every procedure, every piece of equipment, every solution to every problem that can be anticipated. What would happen if we prepared for our Christian mission with the same energy and effort? Life can present more challenges than a NASA mission, yet how many of us devote significant effort and time to understanding God's instructions and guidance for our lives?

As we approach the end of another year, consider what God has taught you this year. Next year will be full of both blessings and challenges—are you diligently preparing?

It took a group of high schoolers to teach me a powerful lesson about sharing God's goodness.

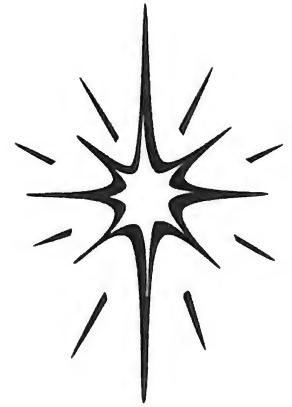
As part of my first job in education, I worked at a college preparatory school serving seven hundred students from pre-kindergarten to the twelfth grade. In addition to serving as the primary fundraiser for the school, I also had the privilege of acting as an advisor to a group of fifteen students, ranging from the ninth to twelfth grades. The school had a service requirement for students, and many did just enough to fulfill the requirement.

As the Christmas season approached, each advisory group was asked to take on a service project of "adopting" a family in need from our community. Traditionally, each student would donate money to be used to shop for the adopted family, ensuring they would have presents and a Christmas meal. I challenged my group to do more, to put more than just money in a pot. I asked the students to reflect on what Christmas means to them. We talked about the true meaning of Christmas and how we could help the family we adopted to have an enjoyable celebration of the spiritual, rather than purely material, meaning of Christmas. If I've said it once, I've said it many times: given the chance, young people will amaze you. They did!

My advisees jumped at the chance to connect with our family and show them that we are all God's children. While their plans included making sure the family had gifts to open on Christmas morning, the students also made sure that they made a difference for more than one day. My students took it upon themselves to get to know the members of the family and let the family get to know them, too. What traditionally had been a once-yearly delivery of gifts became a year-round journey in tutoring, mentoring, and growth in faith for all those involved. These students chose to make this family part of each of their own families.

In Romans 15:14-21, Paul writes that we are full of goodness and knowledge, but we need to be reminded to share that goodness and knowledge. In Isaiah 41:10-20 we are reminded that God is with us; He will strengthen us, help us, and provide for those who believe in Him. In thinking about the growth of the relationship of my students and their adopted family, I saw God's work in the fearless way they opened their hearts to complete strangers.

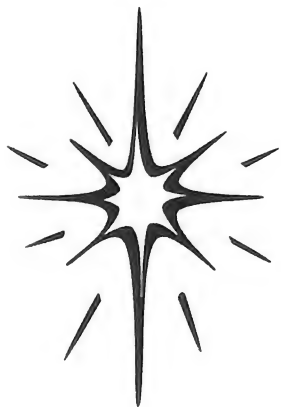
Young or old, we all need to be reminded that the light of God is in each of us, and that we need to share that light. I encourage all of us to look for opportunities to find good in others, share our knowledge, and bring glory to God and His son Jesus Christ during this Advent season.



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 6**

**Patrick Wagner
Vice President for
Advancement**

**Isaiah 41:14-20
Romans 15:14-21**



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Sharon Webb
Assistant Professor
Psychology and
Counseling

Genesis 15:1-18
Matthew 12:33-37

While peace is very much an experiential feeling, I am reminded that there is much going on in God's world that does not reflect one meaning of peace as "freedom from war and violence." Without rehashing the multiple incidences that we are inundated with in the media, I am often reminded of how essential it is to pray unceasingly for God to direct us toward resolutions that would honor our Prince of Peace. In Ephesians 2:14, I am reminded that Christ is our peace; thus the inner experience of peace is realized through Him. When I make time to listen to God, the themes He most often encourages me to pursue are intentionality and hospitality. How am I being, or how can I personally be intentional to others to show sensitivity and hospitality, regardless of worldviews? God has entrusted us to His world, which also comes with accountability for exemplifying Him through love and peace. As the wife and daughter of former members of the military, I also affirm appreciation for peace that often comes through the sacrifices of those who have chosen this commitment. Peace sometimes comes to fruition through sacrifices, but God still promises His provision and faithfulness.

Peace can be a process, often realized as we journey through challenging experiences when we feel the Lord's presence in the midst of difficult times. Many years ago I experienced the significant loss of a miscarriage, and I have been in the midst of community crises multiple times throughout my

volunteer work with the American Red Cross. Although my preference would be that experiencing peacefulness would come more easily, it is through reflections on these experiences that I am reminded of how I truly found peace when I sought and trusted in God's provision instead of depending on my own questioning and understandings. Human nature is to worry and sometimes have fear in troubling experiences, but in Philippians 4:7 Paul reminds us that God's peace exceeds our human understandings. When personal or community tragedy occurs, it is an opportunity to remember Christ's provision, seeking His peace.

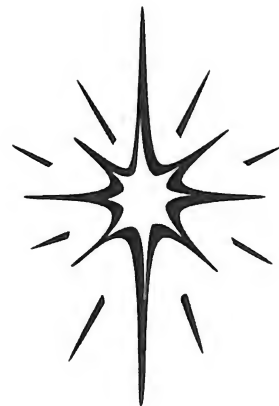
Experiencing genuine peace is sometimes more challenging than we prefer. However, I have found that I experience peace more fully on days that I make intentional time to begin and end each day with prayer and meditation. When we genuinely experience inner peace, we can then more readily influence societal peace. "Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you" (Isaiah 26:3).

One of my favorite things about this time of year is watching Christmas movies on TV. My favorite Christmas movie of all time is indisputably *Elf*. The always-hilarious Will Ferrell outdoes himself as Buddy the Elf. If you haven't seen it yet, I implore you to watch it as soon as possible. You won't regret it!

You may be thinking to yourself, "Steph, what on earth does *Elf* have to do with Psalm 146?" Well, I'm glad you asked. You see, *Elf* is not just the GREATEST MOVIE EVER, it also has a message. Buddy starts his life as a baby in an orphanage who stows away in Santa's sack and ends up at the North Pole being raised by Papa Elf (Bob Newhart, another comic genius). In spite of the fact that he is larger than all the other elves and has no ability to build toys, he is firmly committed to the notion that he is indeed an elf. As a grown up, Buddy travels to New York City to find his birth father, who is on Santa's naughty list. Even when he leaves the North Pole to travel through the seven levels of the Candy Cane forest, through the sea of swirly twirly gum drops, through the Lincoln Tunnel, ending up in New York City, no amount of scoffing from the city folk dissuades Buddy from knowing in his heart that he is still an elf. Buddy remains steadfast in his belief of being an elf and in all things Santa Claus, despite

being laughed at by everyone around him. Psalm 146 tells us that the Lord loves the righteous. The righteous are often oppressed and persecuted because they follow the Lord. But as Jesus said (Matthew 5:10), "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

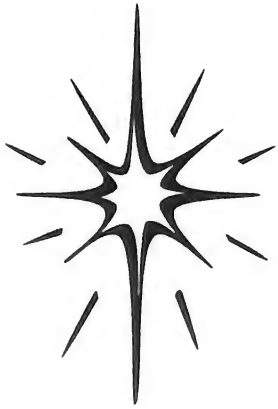
Spoiler alert: By the end of the movie, Buddy's beliefs are so strong that he is able to sway even the most cynical New Yorker into believing in the spirit of Christmas. He remained faithful to his beliefs. Isn't that part of what this psalm is about? "He remains faithful forever." To me, this Psalm is about remembering always to have faith and trust in the Lord, especially during times of despair. When we are weak and needy, we should trust in the Lord to bless us. It would have been easy for Buddy to give up when no one around him had faith, but he persevered and managed to encourage others to have faith. I think the psalmist is saying that we will be blessed when we trust the almighty God as our help and our hope and reminds us that the Lord will reign forever; therefore, praise Him (146:10).



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 8

Stephanie Stearns
Senior Assistant to
the President

Psalm 146:5-10
2 Peter 3:1-10



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 9

John Wright
School of Divinity Student

Ruth 4:13-17
2 Peter 3:11-18

If one believes the story of Ruth the Moabite to be a product of the Second Temple Period, then one must consider it within that context. This is not the only possible setting for authorship, but it is the interpretive paradigm I will assume here (following André LaCocque). In the context of this period (the rebuilding of the temple), the Moabites are unclean foreigners and outsiders, a people to be shunned. Therefore, within the biblical narrative, Ruth the Moabite is an example of “the other.”

In Genesis 19, the Moabites are described as the product of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters. The NRSV labels this section of the text as “The Shameful Origin of Moab.” They are condemned by the prophets, and upon Ezra’s discovery of the intermarriage between Israelites and Moabites, he cries,

And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, “The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever” (Ezra 9:10-12 NRSV).

Ezra laments these acts because in his eyes such intermarriage, and its resultant children, would pollute the restored community. Thus, the foreign wives and their children are expelled “according to the law” (Ezra 10:3). Therefore, in this social setting, Ruth represents “the other,” a Moabite. Naomi is also an old and childless widow, next to worthless in this ancient culture. They are two worthless women, without status, dignity, or hope.

While harvesting the fields Ruth meets Boaz, and he looks kindly upon her. The two are eventually married (remarkably) and a child is conceived. For Naomi, this child becomes a restorer of life and happiness, nourishment in her old age. Ruth, in turn, has become more valuable than even seven sons, and in the patriarchal context, this is remarkable praise. Thus, Ruth and Naomi are redeemed through a child. The child, whose name was Obed, would become the father of Jesse, the father of David.

It is important for the people of God to remember “the other” in our midst, for the first shall be last and the last first. The house of David and the kingdom of Israel indeed is established through a Moabite, “the other.” Therefore, let us remember in this Advent season that “the other” also brought forth our redemption. For Obed became the father of Jesse, the father of David, “the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah” (Matthew 1:16).

This story concerns a favored but childless wife named Hannah. After praying to God, she has a son named "Samuel," which means "name of God."

The Song of Hannah is a hymn of praise to Yahweh that Hannah sings celebrating the birth of Samuel. Its insertion here was no doubt due to the reference to the barren. The song is one of praise of Yahweh's power, against which mortal opponents can do nothing. Life and death, honor and dishonor, all these and more are under Yahweh's direction.

God's power is not despotic. However, God will judge everyone by moral standards and will give strength to the Davidic king. This song was probably the model for the Song of Mary (Luke 1: 46-55).

Christ's coming was announced by a forerunner as recorded in Isaiah 40:3: "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

This prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist as recorded in Luke 3:3: "And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins."

In a similar sense, both John the Baptist and Jesus had the same goal of bringing salvation to God's people. John the Baptist did this through preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sin, while Jesus, on the other hand, preached the good news to the poor and the year of the Lord's favor. The message of John the Baptist pushes further against the divisions caused by differences in social status.

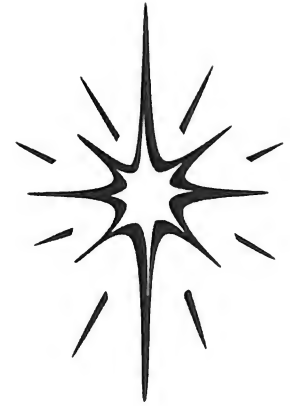
As the "pathway" is being prepared in Luke 3:4, seemingly an impossible task must be accomplished. Valleys must be filled and mountains leveled, curves straightened, and rough places smoothed.

The image of these words reflects a powerful construction force grinding up everything in its path. God's highway will roll over every obstacle of unbelief or idolatry.

As God's people this Advent season, we must prepare for the King! Prayerfully we will "straighten out" our lives through repentance of sin. The important words quoted from Isaiah say, "then all people will see the salvation sent from God."

This showed Luke's non-Jewish audience that salvation was for all people and not just for the Jews alone. John the Baptist called all humankind to prepare to meet Jesus!

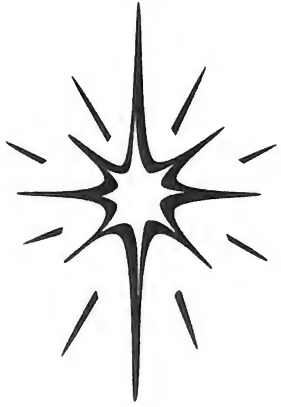
This must then become obvious to all believers, even more so during the Advent season. May God continue to bless you and your families during the grandest time of the year, the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ of Nazareth!



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 10**

**Robert Setzer
Pastor,
Mt. Pisgah Missionary
Baptist Church
Gastonia, NC
School of Divinity Graduate**

**I Samuel 2:1-8
Luke 3:1-18**



**SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 11**

**Al Cadenhead
Assistant Vice President
for Church Advancement**

**Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11**

At first glance, these two passages appear to have little in common, even being separated in time by many centuries. Yet, in a way that only Holy Scripture can do, they both have a word for the Advent season, addressing an urgent need among us today. Both passages are stories of people in captivity. The people in the Isaiah text have been held captive in a foreign land. The Matthew text is about a hero in the New Testament named John, who is captive in prison. Both passages are about people who are struggling for hope.

John has sent his followers to Jesus to confirm that He really is the Messiah. One might wonder initially why John is raising that question since he was among the first to acknowledge Jesus as the “expected one.” Yet, do not forget that John is in prison. He is tired and knows he is likely to lose his life soon. He has to be struggling for hope that it is all for the right reason. Jesus sends him word that He (Jesus) is the One. Don’t worry.

The Isaiah text is about a people who are struggling for hope. They have been held captive, separated from their historical beginnings. They want to go home. Again, the real issue is hope, one of life’s most important ingredients. Regardless of which version you read, they all begin with the promise of hope. “They will rejoice,” or “The desert and the parched land will be glad.” The Isaiah text employs beautiful imagery to describe the way that hope will be

realized, imagery of the wilderness coming into glorious bloom, human lives being dramatically transformed. And a passage that begins in the wilderness ends with the hope that the people will enter Zion with singing.

The need for hope was not the sole property of the ancient Jews. There is so much need for hope today. I am writing this piece after spending most of the day on the road, which also means listening to the radio, mostly NPR. I have listened to endless news broadcasts, and little or no good news. The Presidential candidates are making their predictable accusations against each other, over issues that are superficial at best. There was also the news of several bombs exploding in the New York area. The rest of the news was similar. And then there are personal struggles that we all deal with constantly. I thought as I listened, how we need a sense of hope today. Isaiah tells the people to rejoice; there is hope. Those followers of John came back to him, saying, “It is going to be ok; Jesus is the One!” Advent is all about hope, hope that comes from the way God has broken into life, real life: “the blind will receive their sight. The lame will walk.” There is reason to hope this very day. Why? Because Jesus has come and He continues to come to us every day.

As we move through life, we are faced with many trials. We often experience brokenness, downheartedness, loneliness, a feeling of wanting, or, as with the psalmist in Psalm 42, a thirsty soul in need of refreshment from God. We cry out and question God in the midst of our troubles, looking for deliverance, a sign of His presence, or a plan for our lives.

Before Jesus' arrival on Earth, the region in which He was born hungered for rescue, much like the psalmist mentioned above. The people had been conquered, oppressed, and downtrodden, and were looking for the deliverer they had been promised by prophets for hundreds of years. In seeking signs of the prophecy's fulfillment, the people expected God to show up in an obvious and powerful way.

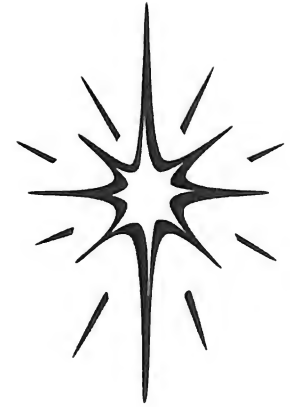
God, however, often works in ways that we least expect or may miss because we're not being attentive. Instead of sending a powerful warrior to free the people from political oppression, He sent a child to free them from the oppression of sin, a child who would grow up to demonstrate how to love God and others by ultimately making the greatest sacrifice.

Later, in Acts, when the new church was experiencing tremendous growth in the face of persecution, people looked for signs to prove the truth of the apostles' words. God performed miracles through the apostles, providing evidence that the people needed to believe in the Lord. Soon word spread, and the faith of the people grew.

God has made his presence known in my life, sometimes through more obvious ways. A few months ago, my husband and I found out that we are expecting a child, our first, in April. It is amazing how we have grown and how our perspectives have changed as we prepare to bring this precious baby into the world. We've become closer as a couple, understanding the great responsibility we face together, and knowing that God has a plan for our lives and for our child's, but not knowing what that plan entails.

I am also reminded, when I take the time to notice, of God's presence and love for me in more subtle ways. A soft rainfall, a Facetime phone call with my niece and nephews, an uplifting conversation with a dear friend, and times of quiet introspection are smaller, but no less significant, ways in which God lets me know He loves me and has a plan for me.

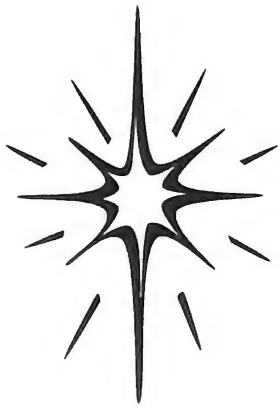
As we celebrate the season of Advent, we celebrate the most amazing sign of God's love and plan for us. I challenge you to take the time to notice the miracles, both large and small, that He places in your life each day to give you the refreshment that you need and remind you of His presence.



**MONDAY,
DECEMBER 12**

**Mary Beth Martin
Major Gift Officer**

**Psalm 42
Acts 5:12-16**



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 13**

**M. Lamont Littlejohn, Jr.
Servant Pastor/Teacher
Mt. Calvary Baptist Church
Shelby, NC
Adjunct Professor
School of Divinity**

**Ezekiel 47:1-12
Jude 17-25**

Fourteen years ago, my wife and I, along with our nine-month-old daughter, were vacationing at Wrightsville Beach. It was a clear and beautiful Friday afternoon. We rolled out the beach towels, set up the tents, and unfolded our lounge chairs. Off I went into the ocean while waving and smiling at my wife and daughter. I can remember easing into the cold but refreshing water. Slowly I continued moving deeper and deeper into the water. Soon I was deep enough so that my feet could not touch the ocean floor. For a few minutes I was doing fine on my own, but then a strong current caused me to drift further out into the ocean. I started to panic and fight the waves, instead of floating and allowing the waves to bring me back to shore. I remember screaming, "Help!" I must be honest; I thought I was going to drown. I screamed again, "Someone help me!" Then a life preserver ring landed in front of me; I reached out and grabbed hold of it. The man on the other end said, "Hold on and I will pull you in!"

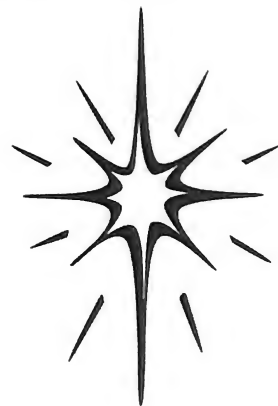
In our scripture reading today, I am reminded of this water experience and the man on the other end of the life preserver ring. The prophet Ezekiel had his own experience with water. He notices a small amount of water leaking from the temple. Soon the water that was once a minor leakage turned into a body of water. The water became so deep he could not cross it by foot. The guide who led him into the water by a measuring device asked, "Mortal, have you seen this?" The water that flowed from the temple was not a means of death but the source of life. In Jude, the author focuses

on obtaining the full measure of salvation through the mercy of Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. As the beloved, we are to remain pure by resisting the indulgence of sin. The process of purity happens through the building of Holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, and the love of God. Only God is able to keep us from drowning in the waters of despair and division by lifting us and leading us to the shore of eternal life.

In the midst of a world that appears to be drowning in desolation and wandering in the wrong direction, I hope you can still see an eternal life preserver ring of salvation before you, and God on the other end saying, "Hold on and I will pull you in!"

Two thousand years ago people needed saving grace as much as we do today, but we try today to live life alone. What happens if we walk away from God? Most of us have experienced a season in which we distance ourselves from God and His people and typically nothing bad happens. Millions of Americans live without believing in God and his son, Jesus Christ, most of whom live well and happy in this country. Because of this, we only ask God for help if we are not in control. In Matthew 8, one hears about how believers and non-believers ask Jesus for healing of their neighbors. Jesus healed the sick and removed many demons, but the people were not satisfied with the miracles. In Zechariah 8, citizens asked for restoration of their city. The restoration did not come without pain, but God came through and accomplished the tasks, even if not all were happy with the way He did it. The same is true today; God is still working in this

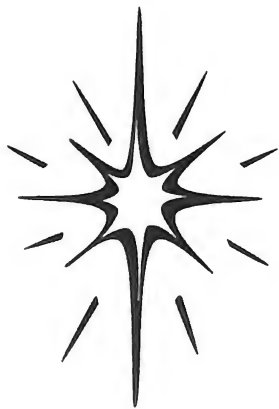
world and country but we may not always see or like how He solves the problems in our private and public lives. Sometimes healing comes in ways we never experienced before, and many times it includes a long, painful road to healing, but the Lord always comes through. Let us be reminded that the Advent season is not only the time of arrival but also the time to reflect and prepare. Jesus Christ came to this earth in a way most people did not think a Messiah, the highest of kings, should arrive. The same thing can happen for us in our pains and struggles. We may experience storms in a way we did not expect or like, but nevertheless how God has planned for us to go through them.



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 14

Benedikt Henkel
IMBA Graduate Student
and School of Divinity
Graduate Assistant

Zechariah 8:1-17
Matthew 8:14-17, 28-34



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 15

Holly Mabry
Digital Services
Librarian

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Galatians 3:23-29

As I was reading through Psalm 80 and Galatians 3 in preparation for writing this devotion, I thought it was really interesting to read how these passages were so well connected across the Old and New Testaments. It was also interesting to consider how God was portrayed in each passage. In Psalm 80, the people of Israel referred to Him as a bright, intimidating, heavenly being. In Galatians, the people see God's love through Jesus Christ.

"Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth" (Psalm 80: 1 NIV). In Psalm 80:1-7, the people of Israel beg God to turn them toward Him and show them how they can redeem themselves in His eyes. Have you ever felt like you don't quite measure up to certain standards, no matter what you do? That's how the people of Israel felt. They repeatedly repented of their sins to no avail because God seemed to remain angry and ruthless.

Verses 17-19 are a continued plea from Israel for God's mercy. This passage also asks God to make them stronger and more equipped to serve Him to the best of their ability. They promise to stay focused on Him, and not slip into their sinful ways. "Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed" (Galatians 3:23 NIV). Galatians 3:23-29 describes God's answer to the plea for mercy and redemption in the Old

Testament. He sent Jesus Christ to save us all who remain faithful to Him. We are no longer bound by our sins. Despite our differences, we are all God's children. This passage reminds us to embrace our differences. We are all one in Christ, all with unique perspectives and talents.

The holiday season is a season of giving and spending time with family and friends, and Advent is a time of excitement and anticipation of the Savior's birth. Amid all the modern day work and school obligations, holiday parties, gifts, and other festivities that happen during this season, remember that God gave us the greatest gift of all, his Son, Jesus.

Best wishes for a safe and happy holiday season.

God is great! God is our Father!

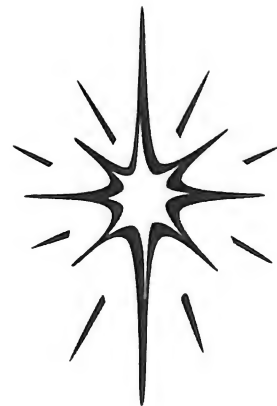
This past year has shown me God's greatness. There have been adversities. God has actively shown His greatness. His greatness is continuously surrounding us. We often take His greatness for granted. I know that I have, at times, taken His greatness for granted. We automatically bask in His love, grace, and mercy. David reminds us very eloquently, "Therefore you are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you." God is a giver. He gives His eternal presence. He promises He will always be with us until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20b). His greatness is forever.

I hear the voice of my grandmother telling me God's greatness gives us the gift of adoption. After the hurt and pain of our ancestry, it is with blessed assurance that we receive our adoption. Our African-American historical heritage has been one of slavery. Being torn from home and family was hard: arriving in a foreign land with no one to cling to and without any knowledge of the language; having your child or baby being torn out of your arms, never to see them again. Our ancestors were slaves of a master. In God's greatness He made it possible for the slaves to learn and understand the language. His Word was spoken in their hearing. They understood that their relationship with Jesus

upheld them. They became heirs. We embraced the heritage of being heirs of Christ. Spreading the good news of the gospel gives us hope. We are no longer slaves to human masters or under Jim Crow laws. We belong to a royal priesthood. We have an inheritance that cannot be taken away.

Jesus adopted us. When we are adopted by Jesus we become heirs. He was born at the right time, the "fullness of time." He was born of woman and under the law. His birth fulfilled the law. He became the ultimate sacrifice. His death redeemed us from our sins and reconciled us with God. As His adopted children God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. His Spirit is with us constantly. We are assured that when trials and tribulations come roaring into our lives that the Spirit enables us to cry out, "Abba, Father." We easily fall on our knees when things are not going well in our lives. We are crying out for help, grace and mercy. We need to remember that when joy, peace, and well-being are flowing in our lives that we cry out, "Abba, Father, we thank you."

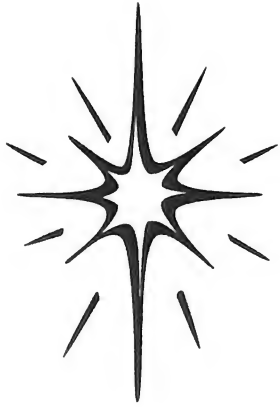
During this Advent season let us live and enjoy every day. Let us acknowledge God's greatness. Let the Spirit of the Son that is in our hearts lead and guide us to be like Him.



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 16

Jacqueline Hampton
School of Divinity
Student

2 Samuel 7:18-22
Galatians 4:1-7



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 17

Mischia Taylor
Instructor
Godbold School of
Business

2 Samuel 7:23-29
John 3:31-36

My kids are my world. I love picking them up from school and asking them, "How was your day?" I never know what I am going to get! Sometimes I see glowing faces that can't wait to tell me about a new activity or something funny a friend said at lunch. Other days, they climb in the car with sullen faces and don't want to say a word. It breaks my heart when they don't have a great day. So we drive quietly in the car and go about our day. Then late at night, right before bed, it never fails; they will open up and tell me everything. It could be someone was picking on them or a friend didn't play with them on the playground. Other times, I find out that maybe they weren't so nice to a friend or said something they regret. The relationship with my kids is one of trust and love. That unconditional love from the day they were

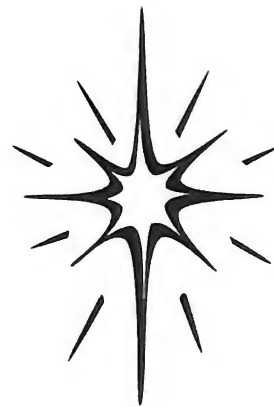
born is always there and the relationship continues to grow. Our God is with us each and every day, no matter what path we choose. When we choose to follow Him and let Him lead the way we will each have those same glowing faces and our heart will be full. When we choose to stray and lead on our own we will soon find that we are struggling and lost. Just as I have unconditional love for my children, God has unconditional love for each of us. We need to turn to Him and trust in Him. We need to show our love for Him. Family is very important and God wants us to have a relationship with our children. That relationship reminds us of God's relationship with us, His children, and His unconditional love for each of us.

Our lives usually don't go according to our plans. My life has been a series of things that I thought should have worked out in a certain way, but didn't. I was going to go to this university and graduate and get this job and marry this guy. Perhaps Mary had similar thoughts. For better or for worse, she was going to marry Joseph and they were going to start a family and do the things that all first century couples did. But we don't talk about the other first century couples. We talk about Mary and Joseph because God took their normal, ordinary, first century lives and made them into something extraordinary.

I've always admired Joseph. His part in the Jesus narratives is small, but his actions speak volumes. He had a plan for his life, too: improve his trade as a carpenter, get married, and have a family, just like every other first century man. But God had a different plan for his life, too. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he could have reacted in a number of ways, but even before he received a message from God, he was already prepared to take honorable actions. He became the earthly father of the Son of God, who was also a kind, loving, compassionate, self-sacrificing, honorable man. Yes, these traits are characteristic of God, but I imagine that it was Joseph who taught Jesus how to embody these qualities on earth. And it was Joseph who taught him how to make something wonderful and useful out of a regular

piece of wood. And at some point, Joseph taught Jesus how to let go, and how it felt to lose someone who had invested so much in his life, especially when he could have chosen not to. Perhaps his earthly father's example helped Jesus to be able to accept God's call on his own life as well, and to be able to say, "Not my will, but your will be done."

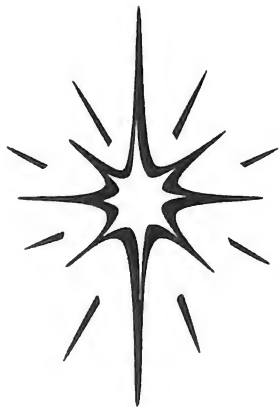
Mary and Joseph both faced a decision in their lives: Do we ignore the words of the heavenly messenger, or do we accept what God has planned for our lives? Living out God's call on our lives can be messy. We do not always understand the plan that God has for our lives; sometimes we struggle with our call. But what if Mary and Joseph had not accepted the call that God had on their lives, the call to be the earthly parents of the Savior of the world? When God intervened in their lives, Mary and Joseph would never be the same. Yes, so often God's plan for our lives is very different from the plans that we have for ourselves, but the plans of God can bring a satisfaction and contentment that the plans we make for ourselves never could. God is still in the business of taking ordinary lives and turning them into something extraordinary. May we accept his call and his will, just as Joseph, Mary, and Jesus did.



**SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 18**

**Rachael Bradley
Secretary, Department
of Religious Studies and
Philosophy
School of Divinity Student**

**Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25**



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 19

Astra Aker
Student, School of
Divinity

I Samuel 2:1-10
Galatians 4:8-20

I love this time of year! I look forward to spending time with family and friends, making memories, engaging in traditions, and reflecting on the joyous hope that Christ brings to the world. I look forward to feeling the joy that seems to permeate the atmosphere and seeing the thread of hope that seems to weave its way throughout the land! It is this time of year that allows us to pause, reflect, and rest in the freedom that Christ brings.

In I Samuel, Hannah rejoices in God and all He has done for her! Out of tradition, she has come to this place many times, but this time, she enters a new season of joy and hope as she worships at the tabernacle. The Advent season is full of many traditions that we hold dear, but it is also a season of new joy and hope as we rejoice, like Hannah, in how the Lord has answered our prayers!

In Galatians, Paul wants the people to understand that it is not in works, but in Christ that true freedom is gained. The Advent season is a time to pause from the work, the distractions, and the throes of life, and simply rest in the freedom that only a baby in a manger can bring.

One of my favorite songs this time of year is "Mary Did You Know?" My eyes always fill with tears as I sit in awe, wondering what that time must have been like for Mary. What was it like for a pregnant Mary literally to be expecting God? How did she feel to actually hold, kiss, and touch His face? Did

she know the fullness of who she had right in front of her? Did it fully resonate that she had actually carried the One who created her? As she held His hand did she also feel the security of His hand holding her? Did she know? Do we know? Do we take the time to actually sit long enough to experience the fullness of His presence with us?

I pray that this Advent you will take the time to rejoice in worship as you enter a new season of joy and hope! I pray that you will take time to pause from the toiling and rest in Christ's freedom! I pray that you will savor every moment reflecting on the fullness of our expectant hope in Christ Jesus our Lord!

The celebration of Advent is proclaimed in Paul's retelling of the birth of Ishmael and Isaac. God blesses Abraham, and through Isaac's birth by Sarah in her old age, Abraham and all the world are blessed. For the apostle Paul, the Gentile Christians in Galatia have become a part of God's coming kingdom through the birth of Jesus Christ. In Christ Jesus, Galatian Christians, and by extension all Christians, have become children of promise through faith. For Paul, Isaac is associated with God's promise. Ishmael, in contrast, is a child of the flesh. Abraham sought to bring about fulfillment of God's blessing of children by bearing a son through Hagar, Sarah's maid servant. The covenant, or promise, to Abraham is to bless the nations through the birth of Isaac. God has miraculously blessed Abraham, opening the womb of Sarah, who was barren. The miracle of Isaac's birth is a cry of rejoicing. Paul, through the symbolic retelling of this story, is encouraging Galatian Christians to embrace the freedom that comes from being a part of God's promise; Jerusalem Christians traveled to Galatia to try to force Galatian Christians to observe the Torah and to accept circumcision as a sign of the covenant. Paul encourages believers to see their faith as a fulfillment of God's promise.

What does it mean to be part of God's kingdom? Paul proclaims that Christ has set us free. Through Abraham, all nations are to be blessed. Our generation of believers also shares in that blessing in that we, too, are children of promise. God has fulfilled his promise to bless all nations. Galatian Christians are children of promise through faith, not through biological lineage to Abraham or ritual acceptance of circumcision. We, too, are children of this promise.

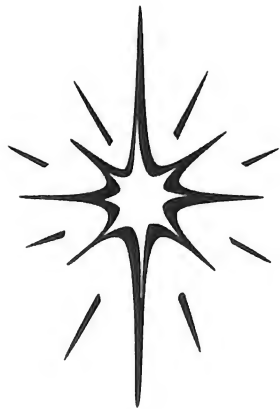
As I reflect on this passage, I am reminded that God's love reaches out to all humankind. The old covenant has paved the way for God's redeeming love to reach all humankind. To experience God's love through faith in Christ Jesus helps us all to embrace the message of the Advent season. Christ brings hope and fulfills the promise of the Old Testament. Through Abraham, all of the nations are blessed. In what ways may we bless others during this Advent season? As Christians, we sing for joy—Christ is born today. Through Christ, we are able to be born anew, not of flesh, but as children of promise. May we experience the Christmas season and the joy that faith in Christ brings.



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 20**

**Stephen Sain
Associate Registrar**

**Genesis 21:1-21
Galatians 4:21-5:1**



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 21

David Yelton
Associate Provost of Arts
and Sciences and
Professor of History

Genesis 37:2-11
Matthew 1:1-17

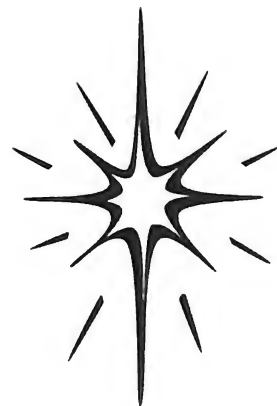
Advent commemorations often include Matthew 1:1-17, which traces Jesus' lineage from Abraham to "Joseph, the husband of Mary" and features famous figures like David and Solomon. It reminds us of the blessings of family ties and traditions that are central to many Christians' fondest Advent and Christmas memories.

Yet we all know of family situations less idyllic; Genesis 37:2-11—not a typical Advent reading—recounts such a tale of familial hatred, jealousy, and violence. In this passage, Joseph, youngest son of Jacob, describes his dreams to his parents and brothers, including Judah, a multiple great grandfather of Jesus (Matthew 1:2). In the first, the sheaves Joseph's brothers had gathered all bowed down to the sheaf bound by Joseph. In the second, the sun, moon and eleven stars (representing his father, mother, and brothers) all bowed down before Joseph. The result was that "his brothers hated him still more," and his father "rebuked" him for, in his view, arrogantly claiming superiority over his brothers and that he would one day rule over them. To them, Joseph showed an insulting lack of respect and humility and violated the norms expected of a youngest son. Certainly, Joseph does appear prideful, challenging, and taunting in presenting his dreams to his already resentful brothers. They would have confidently claimed Joseph's actions violated societal conventions and he deserved to be put in his naturally ordained place, even to the point of being sold into slavery. Joseph's brothers viewed him through the lens of their own expectations and their definitions of who he should be and how he should act.

But, contemporary Hebrew culture also considered dreams to be visions of the future, a message from God foretelling Joseph's future greatness. He ultimately became chief advisor to Egypt's pharaoh due to his ability to interpret dreams as portents of the future; he subsequently utilized his power to save his brothers and their families from famine, when he could easily have avenged their selling him into slavery.

Indeed, the true lesson in Genesis 37:2-11 is the danger of a lack of humility. Joseph's brothers' jealousy, arrogance, and insistence on focusing upon their human understanding of the natural familial pecking order caused them to fail to see Joseph's true gifts of wisdom and insight. Advent, as a time in which Christians are called to prepare for the coming of Jesus, is a time for us to work on avoiding such hubris. We need to set aside our insistence on understanding everything through our own experience and expectations and in accordance with our will and schedules. In particular, we need to be careful to exhibit humility when dealing with others. If we, like Joseph's siblings, arrogantly insist that others conform to our will or face our wrath and rejection, we fail to recognize Christ in others and thereby fail to exhibit Christ in ourselves. And isn't Advent about preparing ourselves to welcome the Savior into our lives and our actions?

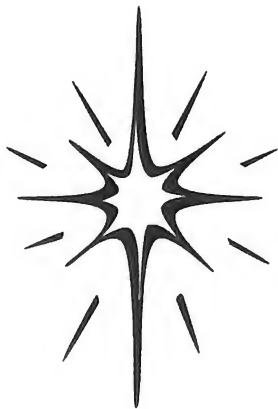
The concept of this painting is "what if?" What if I created an all-white painting? In the history of art, white symbolizes innocence and purity. What if Mary was from rural Cleveland County and this century? What if each one of us was as willing as she was to be a vessel for the Lord? What if after we said "yes" to Him, we left the unfolding of circumstances to Him, too? What if our response to the Holy Spirit was one of humility and praise, like Mary's? What if we held as close to our hearts the Names of God from these passages as she held the Son of God? Our Mighty One, Judge, King, the Lord, God my Savior. What if? Blessed will we also be who believe that the Lord will fulfill His promises.



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 22

Susan Carlisle Bell
Professor of Art

Isaiah 33:17-22
Luke 1:45-55



**FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 23**

**Meredith Rowe
Assistant Professor of
Biology**

**2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29
Galations 3:6-14**

As we near the end of this season of Advent, this season of waiting and preparation, our excitement and anticipation grow. That great Light who will lift our darkness emerges on the horizon, but still, we wait. Just as we sit during a musical prelude to prepare our hearts and minds for worship, here we sit during our prelude to the Christmas season to prepare our hearts and minds for the arrival of Christ.

In our reading today from 2 Samuel 7, David is expressing his gratitude for the promises of enormous blessings he has just received from the Lord: "And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant" (v. 28, NRSV). David receives these blessings with a heart of humility and gratitude.

As I reflect on the last year of my job search and transition to Gardner-Webb, I cannot help but echo David's gratitude for God's blessings. Although my search was not an easy process, I see God's grace in the patience and guidance of my family, mentors, and co-workers. I also see God's hand at work during my initial conversations with those who would become my colleagues. For me, this year was a season of waiting to hear God's call and of preparation to participate actively in this new calling. I am so profoundly grateful for God's blessings during this time of transition, but I am also grateful for the sense of belonging and community that I have found here at Gardner-Webb.

My hope and prayer is that today you will take time to reflect on this Advent season and this year. Before the church services and family celebrations begin, before the tables are laden and the gifts are given, take time to reflect on the blessings that you have experienced. They may have taken the form of a new phase of school, a job transition, the smile of a newborn baby, or something else entirely. Whatever the way, undoubtedly each of us has experienced enormous blessings. I pray that during this season we find ourselves truly grateful.

Charles Dickens was a great English novelist and one of the most popular authors of all time. His best-known books include *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens also wrote five Christmas novellas. The first, entitled *A Christmas Carol*, is one of the most famous Christmas stories ever written. As a matter of fact, it may very well be the best known Christmas story, other than the biblical account of the birth of Christ. In *A Christmas Carol*, three ghosts (or spirits) show an old miser named Ebenezer Scrooge his past, present, and future. Scrooge realizes he has been living a life of greed and is transformed into a warm, caring, and unselfish person.

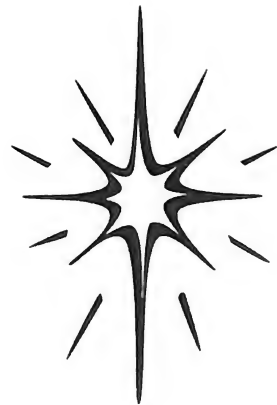
Dickens was not the first to recognize how a look at the past and a look at the future can transform one's present. As people of God, we are called to live today in the light of yesterday and tomorrow. Our lives are to be lived inspired by the past and future appearances of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Such inspiration helps us know how to live in the present.

In Paul's letter written to Titus, there is no mention of angels, shepherds, magi bearing gifts, or any of the other extraordinary sights we have come to associate with Christmas. Yet, in one sentence Paul captures the essence of the Christmas story and puts it in summary form: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (Titus 1:11). That is the message of Christmas. It is all about grace. God's grace makes its appearance in Jesus Christ and has as its purpose the salvation of the world.

The initial appearing of God's grace in the first advent of Christ is central to the celebration of Christmas, but it also prompts us to look forward to the second advent, "the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 1:13). Previously, at His first coming His glory was revealed. John writes, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). His glory was revealed by the signs and wonders He performed and by His death and resurrection. Still, His glory was veiled. Many did not comprehend it or even suspect it. But one day, the Bible tells us the veil will be lifted; His glory will be revealed and every eye will see Him (Revelation 1:7).

We live in the present, between the already (the first advent) and the not yet (the second advent). The grace to live in the present comes from both directions and it trains us "to renounce impiety and worldly passions and . . . to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly" (Titus 1:12).

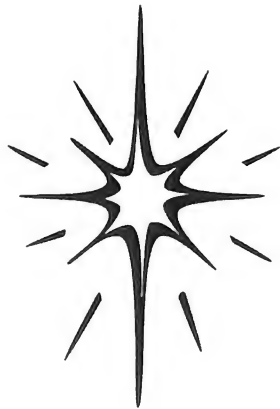
This Christmas Eve presents a beautiful opportunity to look back and remember what God has done for us and to look forward to the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. It also presents the opportunity to consider how we should live in between.



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 24**

**Tracy Jessup
Vice President for
Christian Life and Service
and Senior Minister
to the University**

**Isaiah 9:2-7
Titus 2:11-14**



**SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 25**

**Frank Bonner
President of the
University**

**Isaiah 62:6-12
Luke 2:1-7; 8-24**

One of my fondest memories from growing up is spending Christmas at my grandmother's home in Boaz, Alabama. My aunts, uncles, and cousins on my mother's side of the family lived there as well. Early on Christmas afternoon, they would come over to my grandmother's house, and we would sit around the tree taking turns opening presents. I remember most vividly the joyous anticipation of their arrival bearing gifts and subsequently watching the gifts accumulate around the tree.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we might ponder the coming, the arrival, of this greatest of gifts. Isaiah uses that motif as he foresees the coming of salvation: "Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people . . . Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him'" (Isaiah 62:10-11). Without stretching the motif too far, we might also note that the birth of Jesus comes after a rather arduous journey. The most profound passage on the coming of Jesus into this world is John 1:1-18—in my thinking, one of the most profound passages in all scripture. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (v. 9). "He came to what was his own" (v. 11). For Christians the true meaning of Christmas is to be found in the joyous arrival of Jesus in our lives, bringing with him that greatest of gifts, "the power to become children of God" (John 1:12).

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The left edge of the paper shows some slight shadowing, suggesting it might be part of a bound notebook. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

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Gardner-Webb University At-a-Glance

- Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University's purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).
- We serve nearly 4,000 students from 40 states and 16 countries.
- A total of five professional schools, two academic schools, and 13 academic departments offer over 80 undergraduate and graduate major fields of study.
- Our 173 full-time faculty (13:1 student-to-faculty ratio) help to foster meaningful dialogue, critical analysis, and spiritual challenge within a diverse community of learning.
- The U.S. News and World Report has ranked Gardner-Webb as one of the Best Universities in the nation positioning it in the top 20% of all universities.
- Recognized as a Doctoral University by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, GWU is one of only six National Universities in the country that reported no classes with more than 50 students in 2015-2016.
- The President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll recognized Gardner-Webb University for the ninth consecutive year for outstanding community service. This national recognition honors our 2,499 students who participated in service-learning or community service opportunities outside of the classroom (for 71,402 hours).
- Gardner-Webb is one of only 25 institutions nationwide to receive an "A" rating for commitment to liberal arts core curriculum standards. 1,100 colleges and universities were studied, and Gardner-Webb placed at the head of the class for the fifth consecutive year in the ACTA study.
- Gardner-Webb was ranked number four in North Carolina for academic quality, affordability, and student experience in online learning by the national Best Colleges organization.
- Gardner-Webb competes in 11 men's and 11 women's sports within NCAA Division I competition as members of the Big South, Southern, and Coastal Collegiate Conferences.



GARDNER-WEBB
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